DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 242 FL 800 996

AUTHOR Shank, Cathy C.; Terrill, Lynda R.
TITLE Teaching Multilevel Adult ESL Classes. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-LE-95-02
PUB DATE May 95
CONTRACT RR93002010
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM NCLE, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Classroom Techniques; *English (Second Language); Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Independent Study; Instructional Materials; *Literacy Education; *Multilevel Classes (Second Language Instruction); Needs Assessment
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Teachers in multilevel adult English-as-a-Second-Language classes are challenged to use a variety of materials, activities, and techniques to engage the interest of the learners and assist them in their educational goals. This digest recommends ways to choose and organize content for multilevel classes, explains grouping strategies, discusses a self-access component--independent work for learners, and offers suggestions for managing the classes. Contains 13 references. (JL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 383 242

Teaching Multilevel Adult ESL Classes

By Cathy Shank and Lynda R. Terrill

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ERIC® Digest

May 1995
EDO-LE-95-02

National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Teaching Multilevel Adult ESL Classes

by Cathy C. Shank and Lynda R. Terrill
Arlington Education and Employment Program, Virginia

In multilevel adult English as a second language (ESL) classes, teachers are challenged to use a variety of materials, activities, and techniques to engage the interest of the learners and assist them in their educational goals. This digest recommends ways to choose and organize content for multilevel classes; it explains grouping strategies; it discusses a self-access component, independent work for individual learners; and it offers suggestions for managing the classes.

The Multilevel Class

Teachers use the term *multilevel* to identify any group of learners who differ from one another in one or more significant ways. Arguably, every class is multilevel because learners begin with varying degrees of competence and then progress at different rates in each of the language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Santopietro, 1991; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). However, in many adult ESL classes, there are even more variables that affect the levels within the class. Some programs (generally because of funding constraints, learner scheduling difficulties, number of learners, and program logistics) place learners of all levels, from beginning to advanced, in a single class. Often such classes include speakers of many native languages, some that use the roman alphabet, some that do not. Learners may have varying degrees of literacy in their first language as well as in English (Bell, 1991; Santopietro, 1991; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Other factors that add to diversity in the classroom and to rate of progress in learning English are the type and amount of a learner's previous education; the learning style preference; learner expectations of appropriate classroom activities; and the culture, religion, sex, and age of each learner (Guglielmino & Burrichter, 1987).

Needs Assessment

To ensure some success for all learners in the multilevel classroom, teachers must determine what each learner needs and wants to learn. This is accomplished through ongoing needs assessment that includes both standardized tests and alternative assessment, one-on-one interviews with learners, group discussions, and learner observation (Alexander, 1993; Holt, 1995; Isserlis, 1992; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Throughout the needs assessment process, it is important that adult learners are actively involved in choosing the direction and content of their learning (Auerbach, 1992; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Techniques for selecting the content or themes of class activities might include whole or small group brainstorming and prioritizing activities, and documentation and prioritization of individual learner goals ("I need English for..."). (See Auerbach, 1992 for additional suggestions on using learner themes.)

Planning for the Multilevel Class

Planning for multilevel classes requires the ability to juggle many different elements as teachers must provide activities that address the learning styles, skill levels, and specific learning objectives of each individual (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Wrigley & Guth, 1992). Teachers can use a variety of techniques and grouping strategies and a selection of self-access materials to help all learners be successful, comfortable, and productive for at least a portion of each class time. The planning is time-consuming and the classroom management is exhausting. However, the alternative to this effort—planning and using activities that meet the needs of only those learners whose skills fall somewhere in the middle—will frustrate those with lower skills, and bore the more advanced learners (Boyd & Boyd, 1989; Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

When planning and teaching the multilevel ESL class, as with any adult ESL class, the teacher must remember that learner perceptions of what constitutes sound language learning may not match those of the teacher. The teacher's enthusiasm and goodwill can usually encourage learners who resist unfamiliar and non-traditional classroom activities to participate fully in the class. However, where there is a mismatch between learner and teacher perceptions of useful activities, teachers should be prepared to include activities that meet learner expectations (Wrigley & Guth, 1992). For example, a story developed from a language experience approach (LEA) activity (Taylor, 1992) could be a source for grammatical drills or for pronunciation exercises.

Grouping Strategies

The use of grouping strategies can form the basis for the multilevel class as teachers mix and match groups, pair learners, and allow time for individual or solo activities during each class period (Bell, 1991; Berry & Williams, 1992).

Certain factors should also be considered in setting up group and pair activities, including differences in age, social background, country of origin, and educational background, as well as English ability. Some learners might not be comfortable in groups with other learners they consider to be more prominent or of higher status. And some men may resist being in groups where women are the leaders. Although the teacher can often encourage reluctant learners to try new activities, sensitivity to potential difficulties arising from group and pair work is necessary. Class discussions of cultural and personal differences in learning styles and interaction patterns may help overcome initial resistance (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

• *Whole Group* activities are appropriate initially for beginning a new class and regularly for daily warm-up time. They can focus the entire group on a theme that later involves various individual and small group tasks. The whole group can participate in a class project to create a finished product (such as a book, bulletin board, or video), where each learner completes a part of the task based on individual abilities and interests (Bell, 1991). Other initial whole group activities that lend themselves to follow-up activities at

CAL Center for Applied Linguistics • 1118 22nd Street, NW • Washington, DC 20037 • (202)429-9292

various difficulty levels include reading comic strips or photo stories; listening to audiotapes or viewing videotapes; taking field trips; learning songs; and brainstorming on topics of interest.

• *Small Group* work provides opportunities for learners to use their language skills and is often less intimidating than whole group work. Small groups can be set up according to interest or ability, and need not be equal in size or permanent (Bell & Burnaby, 1984).

Heterogeneous groups are made up of learners who have disparate skills. Cross-ability grouping allows stronger learners to help others and maximizes complementary learner strengths (Bell, 1991). Activities suitable for cross-ability groups are jigsaw activities; board games; and creating posters, lists, art, and multimedia projects.

Homogeneous groups are made up of learners who have roughly equal skills (for example, all are literate or are orally fluent). Activities often suitable for like-ability groups are problem-solving, sequencing, and process writing.

• *Pairs of learners* working together have the greatest opportunity to use communicative skills. Like-ability pairs succeed when partners' roles are interchangeable or equally difficult (Bell, 1991). Activities for homogeneous pairs include information gap (where the assignment can only be completed through sharing of the different information given each learner), dialogues, role plays, and pair interviews.

Cross-ability pairs work best when partners are given different roles and heavier demands are placed on the more proficient learner (Bell, 1991). Some examples are LEA stories where one dictates and one transcribes, interviews where one questions and one answers, and role plays where one learner has a larger role than the other.

Using Self-Access Materials

When learners are doing independent or solo activities in the multilevel classroom, using self-access materials can enable them to take responsibility for choosing work appropriate to their individual levels and interests (Bell, 1991; Berry & Williams, 1992). A self-access component includes activities from all skill areas as well as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation exercises. With self-access materials, each task is set up so that learners need minimal, if any, assistance from the teacher to accomplish the activity. Directions are clear and answers (when applicable) are provided on the back of the activity allowing learners to informally evaluate their own work without teacher intervention (Bell, 1991). When used regularly in the classroom, self-access time can foster a relaxed environment where learners decide how and when to interact with one another, with their teacher, and with English.

Teachers need not have their own rooms to set up self-access corners; a box of materials can travel with the teacher to workplace sites, community centers, or church basements. The following are some materials to include in the self-access collection: art supplies such as scissors, markers, crayons, pens, pencils, paints, paper in various sizes, types, and colors, glue, tape, stapler, stencils, stamps, and magazines for collages, *and* directions for projects (e.g., draw pictures of the native country, draw a calendar and put in holidays, draw the U.S. map); crossword puzzles; articles and books for a range of reading levels; partner dialogues, in envelopes, with directions; information gaps; scrambled sentences; interview questions (with tape recorder and blank tape); writing tasks for individuals, pairs, or groups; board games and puzzles; review materials from topics, structures, and functions covered in class; contact assignments such as drawing a map of the neighborhood or telephoning for information; high interest videos and taped radio segments with teacher-made activities; and computer software programs to choose from.

Managing the Multilevel Classroom

Planning for the multilevel class must also include strategies for managing the group, pair, and individual activities. The teacher may work with one small group at a time while the other learners or groups of learners are engaged in independent work (Berry & Williams, 1992). Some teachers manage the various groupings by enlisting a volunteer to work with one group while the teacher works with others (Santopietro, 1991). Learners can also act as peer tutors or peer group leaders (Bell, 1991). Again—as was true with grouping and pairing strategies—in choosing peer group tutors and leaders, teacher sensitivity to learner expectations, to learning styles, and to personal and cultural issues is paramount.

Conclusion

Teaching multilevel adult ESL learners is a challenge that requires great skill and sensitivity. Teachers whose planning reflects knowledge of their learners' different language abilities, culture, educational background, classroom expectations, and preferred learning styles can help adults learning English as a second language to be partners in their own education. Through use of versatile grouping strategies and self-access materials, teachers can manage a multilevel adult ESL class where all learners will experience success.

References

Alexander, D. (1993). The ESL classroom as community: How self assessment can work. *Adventures in Assessment: Learner-Centered Approaches to Assessment and Evaluation in Adult Literacy, 4,* 34-37.

Auerbach, E.R. (1992). *Making meaning, making change: Participatory curriculum development for adult ESL literacy.* Washington, DC and McHenry, IL: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems. Available from Delta Systems at 800-323-8270.

Bell, J. (1991). *Teaching multilevel classes in ESL.* San Diego, CA: Dominie Press.

Bell, J. & Burnaby, B. (1984). *A handbook for ESL literacy.* Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Press.

Berry, E. & Williams, M.S. (1992). *Multilevel ESL curriculum guide.* Salem, OR: Oregon State Department of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 351 889)

Boyd, J.R. & Boyd, M.A. (1989). *Input-output teacher's manual.* Normal, IL: Abaca Books.

Guglielmino, L.M. & Burrichter, A.W. (1987). *Adult ESL instruction: A challenge and a pleasure: An orientation guide for adult ESL teachers.* Tallahassee, FL: Florida State Department of Education. (EDRS No. ED 288 074)

Holt, G.M. (1995). *Teaching low-level adult ESL learners.* ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education.

Isserlis, J. (1992). What you see: Ongoing assessment in the ESL/literacy classroom. *Adventures in Assessment: Learner-Centered Approaches to Assessment and Evaluation in Adult Literacy, 2,* 41–48.

Santopietro, K. (1991). *Multi-level ESL classroom instruction module.* Denver, CO: Colorado Department of Education.

Shank, C. (1993). *Teaching in the multi-level adult ESL classroom: Module for ESL teacher training.* Arlington, VA: Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP).

Taylor, M. (1992). *The language experience approach and adult learners.* ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education. (EDRS No. ED 350 887)

Wrigley, H.S. & Guth, G. (1992). *Bringing literacy to life: Issues and options in adult ESL literacy.* San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International. (EDRS No. ED 348 896). Available from Dominie Press at 800-232-4570.

Citations with an ED number may be purchased from the **ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS)** at 1-800-443-3742.

The National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) is operated by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education and the National Institute for Literacy, through the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RI 93002010. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the Institute or ED.

For a list of other free NCLE publications, please write or call us at the address on the front.